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Interviewee:	Dr. Cleveland Sellers
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Interviewer:	Dr. John Dittmer
Videographer:	John Bishop
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John Dittmer: My name is John Dittmer, and I am here in Denmark, South Carolina, with videographer John Bishop to interview Dr. Cleveland Sellers, the president of Voorhees College. This interview will become part of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. Dr. Sellers, we are delighted to be here today and we thank you for taking the time to talk with us.

Cleveland Sellers: Thank you, thank you.

JD: I would like to start with your early childhood. You were born and raised right here in Denmark, weren't you?

CS: Born and raised in Denmark. The irony is, is that it's been pretty much a complete circle for me, in that I started out here as a mascot for the college in—when I was three years old. And I came back in 2008 as president of the college. So, it's a very interesting experience returning home.

JD: Yeah, must be.

CS: Yes.

JD: What was it like growing up in Denmark? Tell us something about your childhood, your family.

CS: Well, the first bit of information is, is that the college here was the center, cultural center of and educational center for the community. I actually went to high school on this campus. The state of South Carolina, rather than building a high school for black students, paid Voorhees a tuition for each student. So, all the students in this area, when they started eighth grade, ninth grade, tenth grade, and eleventh grade—I'm sorry, ninth grade, tenth grade, eleventh, and twelfth—they would come to this campus. And this school was actually founded by a woman, twenty-three years old, who was a graduate of Tuskegee.

JD: Oh, wow.

CS: And so, she used the Tuskegee model, in terms of building educational institutions, and came to Denmark to found her school. She had a couple of other efforts in South Carolina, but they were all—two cases of arson and one of malfeasance. So, she ended up here in Denmark. So, the school is made under the Tuskegee or Booker T. Washington industrial education model. That kind of philosophy was very prevalent here. Even though you had the Du Bois influence also at Voorhees College, it was the kind of "build yourself up, educate yourself, have faith in your community," and those kinds of ideals that grew out of Booker T. Washington. So, that was the kind of community I grew up in. It was segregated, I mean, originally segregated.

JD: Talk a little bit about race relations in Denmark.

CS: Race relations were as a segregated community in the South, all throughout the South, and that is separation in terms of schools, social activities, almost complete separation up and down the ranks. There were no busses, so we didn't have segregation on the busses, [laughs] but we did have in the theater. Even in terms of patronizing stores, there were certain things that you had to buy without actually having an opportunity to use the dressing room and that kind of thing to see if it fit, and all of that kind of stuff.

JD: What was the, roughly, the racial breakdown between black and white in the town?

CS: Denmark has been majority black for a long period of time, and it was majority black at that point. But all of the official offices were held by whites: superintendent of the schools, school board, and that kind of thing.

JD: What was the economy back then? What were people doing for a living?

CS: Back then, it was a pretty busy kind of and alive and well economy. We had three railroads that actually came through Denmark. That was the unique environment in which we kind of grew up in. And there was a pickle plant, a furniture plant, a Coca-Cola bottling company, and all those kinds of things. When the railroads went away, and when the economy reverted back to pretty much agriculture, rural agricultural economy, those jobs also went away. And so, you had a decreasing of the population since the period of desegregation. Many whites moved out of the community. The schools in Denmark actually integrated or desegregated around 1972, so you're talking about some eighteen years after *Brown*.

JD: What happened to—?

CS: There was resistance to desegregation—[0:05:00]

JD: Did the white students leave the schools when desegregation came, or did you still have—?

CS: Yes, sir.

JD: Um-hmm.

CS: Over the last ten years, it's been about 98, 99 percent African American in the schools.

JD: Pretty typical in many areas.

CS: Pretty typical, in terms of these areas. But, now, the unique part about the Voorhees connection and the school connection was, was that there were a lot of cultural incentives and there were a lot of educational opportunities that were afforded students. The teachers provide a certain respect for education and dignity for education and also provide nurturing that built up these, I guess, values and principles: the importance of education, the importance of faith, and the importance of service.

And so, we learned that as we went along. We learned about, you know, the Harlem Renaissance and literature and art. We learned about the importance of actually developing skills, going out and returning something to the community that nurtured you and actually got you started. Those kinds of values were very important values for young African Americans to have going out into this new world that would very soon become desegregated. The other was, was that we also were able to tie into the black press and we were able to read about and understand what was going on in Montgomery, and you could discuss that in school. Emmett Till—

JD: Well, talk about that a minute. You were, I think, 11 years old when Emmett Till was murdered in Mississippi.

CS: Yes, sir.

JD: What kind of impact did that have on you? And I want to talk—you to talk about your folks, too, in a little bit.

CS: Um-hmm, yeah. Well, I was devastated by the fact that Emmett could have been me or any other black kid around that same age. And so, I related to that very quickly. And we had discussions in our class about Emmett Till. I had a cover of the *Jet*, took it to school. Some other students had the same thing. And so, we had rational discussions about it. And, you know, the question comes up: How do you address that?

And I think, for us, it was projected out, that that would be our destiny to try to find remedies to a society that would allow that to happen, would condone that, and would actually free those who were responsible for that murder. And I think that that was a way in which we actually got away from revenge and hatred and those kinds of things. We talked about how we were going to use Emmett Till to build on, that we would rectify in our work and in our effort the dastardly tragedy that happened to Emmett Till.

JD: This was—it's become obvious to me that you've had a unique opportunity here in school to do these things.

CS: Yes.

JD: I mean, these kinds of discussions would not be going on in Mississippi classrooms.

CS: Right, yes.

JD: And people would be—teachers could be fired for doing something like that.

CS: Absolutely. Absolutely.

JD: In this rural outpost, why, you—[laughs]

CS: Rural outpost, that's right! And when the independence of the British colonies in Africa was taking place, we could actually relate to that. And some of the professors at the

institution related to Kwame Nkrumah because he was a graduate and a student at Lincoln University.

JD: Oh, yes.

CS: So, there was a kind of common thread here. So, with Patrice Lumumba in the Congo, and Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya, those kinds of discussions were very commonplace. And we did have students here from Africa. So, they were able to actually bring news back through literature and dispatches in Africa. And those things would show up in the campus newsletter or newspaper that the students would actually put up.

And so, it was that kind of nurturing and that kind of educational environment that we came up in. Most of the students that graduated with me went on to college. Some made a detour and went to the armed forces in order for them to get the G.I. Bill so they could come back and go to school. And we're talking about probably somewhere in the neighborhood of 85, 87 percent of the students who graduated with me went on to some kind of college.

JD: Wow, that's amazing!

CS: That's very high. That's very high.

JD: Tell us something about your folks and your family. [0:10:00]

CS: My family, both natives of South Carolina. My mother comes from Abbeville, South Carolina, which is up in the northern part of the state around Greenville and Anderson, South Carolina. She was in a family of eight sisters, and it was a large family. She lived on a large farm. And they actually were farmers and they raised horses on that farm, and other things, but that was their primary focus.

My father grew up in Denmark, South Carolina, and he graduated from high school in 1933. Education was very important to him, because he was in Denmark, and education was very

important to all young African Americans in this community. He was an entrepreneur. He followed in the tradition and footsteps, the things that he had learned from the Booker T. Washington influence at the school. So, he was a farmer, he was a realtor—not realtor, but built and rented houses and property. He drove a cab. Anything that he could find a way in which he could actually generate some revenue from, he did that kind of thing. And the latest, the last major thing that he did was he built a motel. He understood the movement of people in and out, and the need for the colleges that were here to do that kind of thing. And so, that's what he did.

My mother was an educator. She graduated from South Carolina State back, I think, it was around '27, somewhere around that time, and she then went on to Hampton University and she got her masters—and was able to—she got it in nutrition and English, and she was able to come back to South Carolina. She started at Voorhees College and worked here for about twenty years. And then she moved over to the technical and trade school for the state of South Carolina, which was also located here in Denmark, and she worked there for fifteen years. And she had several years, after graduating from South Carolina State, teaching in high schools.

So, she was an educator and she also was very much community-oriented and actually ran, for a number of years when I was younger, a center that was built in Denmark by donations and contributions—the Denmark Recreation Center. And she managed that all the way until she was much older and past her retirement, and she passed that off to another gentleman. But, so, in that, she was very much concerned about working with young ladies and actually helping them kind of grow up and find their way and empower them to be, to take advantage of whatever educational opportunities there were and be good at what they did.

JD: And you have a sister, as well?

CS: Yeah, I have a sister, Gwendolyn. She was a year older than I was. I was born when my father was in the military in World War II. He was stationed in France, and he was very proud of his work there. He had a business, a kind of café-restaurant business that he left to go to fight. And he was in the motor pool, I think, in France, and he went off and came back. Met a lot of people, seemed to have created some good friendships as a result of his experience in France and that kind of thing. And he came back to Denmark and continued.

My sister was born a year before me, and she kind of grew up, also, with our father being out of—for two years in the military. But she went to school here, too, matriculated through, went on and became a schoolteacher, master schoolteacher, school counselor in New Jersey. She was there for thirty years and has returned to South Carolina now.

JD: Was church very important in your family life?

CS: Church was very important in my family life. There was a schism. You know, we—[0:15:00] my mother was an AME when she was born and reared and as she grew up. And when she married my father, he was a Baptist. So, she then went to the Baptist church. And when she came to work at Voorhees, Voorhees was affiliated with the Episcopal church. And she and my sister and I all affiliated with the Episcopal church. And so, she was there for a minute, and then, later in life, after she retired, she went back to the AME church. And so, we remain in the Episcopal church. We're—my sister and I are pretty—almost cradle Episcopalians.

And I have been affiliated with the Episcopal church from that time until now. There were stints in which, you know, I was doing other kinds of things and didn't have the same kind of affiliation that I had before or after, but it has been, even through the Movement experience, very much involved. When I was at Howard at the Nonviolent Action Group, we used to meet at the Episcopal-affiliated Youth Club there at Howard University. And through my experiences

with SNCC, we had at various and sundry times support from Episcopal priests from all over the country and all over the South. So, it's been good.

JB: Can we pause for a second?

CS: Um-hmm.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

CS: Okay.

JD: Well, with this kind of background, it was naturally assumed, I think, that you were going to go to college. But the Movement came along.

CS: Yeah.

JD: And in February of 1960, the sit-ins began in Greensboro, North Carolina, and they spread to Denmark, South Carolina.

CS: Absolutely!

JD: Talk about that for a moment.

CS: Well, again, I'm a high school student. I'm here. I actually work in the student center. I have—my high school assistant principal's wife runs the student center. So, she asked me if I'd work in there, and I do.

And it's on February 1, 1960, the sit-ins occur in Greensboro, North Carolina. And the first night it gets a blip on the news. The second night it has more time, because the news is actually talking about the students and the kind of tactics that were being employed and what was going to happen and all that kind of thing. So, the student center used to fill up every night for the nightly news to see what was going on in Greensboro.

And so, students actually began to talk about the sit-ins and began to talk about having meetings, and then, "What are we going to do and how are we going to do that?" And so, I had the opportunity, because they were in the center, usually, and they would start meeting in the center. And then, they would go to other places, because they felt like they needed to be kind of out of sight of the administration, because nobody knew how the administration was going to accept this. This was just a kind of—students being really actively engaged in this process.

So, they decided to do a demonstration themselves. And they actually were aboveboard with that. They went to the president and asked the president—because it's about two-and-a-half or three miles downtown to the pharmacy—if they could use the school bus, in order for them to go to that. And the president agreed.

JD: Really?

CS: Yes. And so, then the D-day came. I think it was a Thursday. And the students were assembled. And the president had been called by a number of the Board of Trustees, who were local, who said that they didn't think it was a good idea, that he needed to not do the bus and discourage the students from coming downtown. They didn't know what was going to happen and they were concerned. So, he asked that the bus be withdrawn. I think that I would agree that he was a lot like Warmoth T. Gibbs, who was president of [North Carolina] A&T at that time. And his thing was, was that, "I trust you and I trust your judgment," to the students, "but I am not going to be able to be openly supportive of your actions."

JD: Yeah, um-hmm.

CS: So, he told them that, you know, "I cannot allow the bus to be used." And that meant that the students had to march from the campus [0:20:00] all the way down, which is a main thoroughfare on Voorhees Road, downtown to another main thoroughfare to go to the drugstore

that they were protesting at. And it was a kind of—an interesting kind of day. It looked like a very somber march, and the students were single file. It was about seven of them. And they had on their Sunday best and they had on trench coats [JD coughs] because it was kind of cool. And they marched all the way downtown. They went down and they were arrested at that point. A priest from the school—

JD: Hold on. [Begins coughing]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're rolling.

JD: So, there was a sit-in. People were arrested. Where were you in all this?

CS: Well, I was—first, let me just say that because nobody actually knew what the consequences or even unintended consequences were going to be, the guys decided not to have any of the young ladies involved, because they didn't know whether or not there was going to be some police brutality and arrests and all those kinds of things. And they refused to allow any high school students to be involved. Now, you could be involved in the planning and strategy and all that kind of thing. So, I was involved in the planning and the strategy and all that, but I couldn't be involved in the demonstrations.

They were arrested, and the priest from the college actually goes down and retrieves them and brings them back to the campus. I don't think charges were ever affixed to that, because there was never a trial or anything. And I stayed actively involved with these students as they went to churches and other places that were known to be segregated in Denmark and were refused except at the First Baptist Church and a couple of other churches and that kind of thing. So, we stayed active and we stayed connected to the other groups that were engaged in protest during that particular period of time.

JD: In your autobiography, *The River of No Return*, you write that your father was not too excited about your activities.

CS: Well, my activities begin to accelerate. And one of the things that I wanted to do was to put together an organization, so I was thinking about a youth chapter of the NAACP and I began to organize a youth chapter of the NAACP. And once we got it all organized and we got our cards, and the college got its official charter, I wanted to have a rally that would just simply say to the community that there was a youth chapter of the NAACP in the city of Denmark. At that point, there was no NAACP chapter. And when I did that, I invited one of the representatives out of Atlanta to come and speak for the rally. I got the church room, Baptist church, and all of that kind of stuff. And then, I think it was the day of, or the day before, my father said that I would have to refrain from being engaged in this activity and I could not go to the meeting.

JD: How did you respond to that?

CS: Well, I was real upset, because I had done a lot of the legwork and pulled people together and gotten people to commit themselves to going. And, all of a sudden, he said that *you're* not going to even be there at the program. I was really upset and indicated that kind of upset and disgust with him, but I did not go. I mean, I stayed, but I figured that it was time for me then to start looking for other places to be, because I had been bitten by this bug of Emmett Till and Movement activities that were going on, etcetera.

So, I began to look at the possibilities of going to a private school. And I wrote Stanton Military Academy up in Virginia, and I sent the application in and all that kind of thing. And where they had race, I didn't put anything. And so, they called me and asked me—you know, they were looking favorably at me and they said they saw that I did not put in race and they

asked me if I was Negro. And I said, "Yes," and they said, "We're sorry, but we are not going to be able to accept you."

JD: So, you thought [0:25:00] you'd have a shot there?

CS: I thought I was going to have a shot somewhere.

JD: Yeah.

CS: I was just trying to get to an environment where I could kind of be my own person in regards to the Movement.

JD: Yeah.

CS: And after that went by, I figured that I was going to do the rest of my time there. And so, I really got more involved with trying to tap in and support other movements. So, one of those efforts was that we got the same group of young people that made up the Youth NAACP, and we went up to Rock Hill when the Freedom Riders had come through. And then, you had protests of that by what was then known as the Rock Hill Nine. And—

JD: And this was before you were in college?

CS: This was before I was in college, yeah. And when I went up, Charles Jones and Diane Nash and Ruby Doris Robinson had gotten arrested. They had come in from Atlanta to protest the arrest of the—

JD: Yeah.

CS: So, that's where the "jail, no bail" kind of—

JD: So, this is the first time you had met these future colleagues?

CS: I didn't meet them. I went up to—

JD: Oh, I see.

CS: Meet them, and they were in jail.

JD: Oh. [Laughs]

CS: And they had a session in which you could actually go out, but we went up early one morning. We had the principal's car, the priest's car, and my mother's car. We had three cars, and we took three cars full of students from here up there. And I think that in that way, we stayed connected. But I learned of Charles Jones and I learned of Ruby Doris and Diane. And there was another person there, and I can't remember who it was. I just don't want to say somebody who it wasn't.

But there were four SNCCers who had come to that area to give their support, and they went to jail and they talked about—Ruby Doris talked about the fact that there was so much outpouring of support in that community. And food! I think she said she gained about eleven pounds [JD laughs] in the thirty days that she was out there. But anyhow, that was another link and another connection.

And then, I began to find in the state of South Carolina there were other students that were becoming more active. Millicent Brown down in Charleston was getting ready—her father was the head of the NAACP—they were getting ready to file a suit to desegregate the schools in Charleston. And Attorney Matthew Perry also was getting ready to file the suit on behalf of Harvey Gantt at Clemson. And then, later, the three students at the University of South Carolina. So, there was a lot of activity beginning to brew, and we tried to tap into that to get that kind of support. And then, we're off to Howard.

JD: Yeah, talk about—you enrolled in Howard in the fall of '62, I think.

CS: Yes.

JD: What kind of a school—what were you expecting? And what did you find?

CS: Well, I expected Howard, because it was considered one of the larger HBCUs, with a lot of history and tradition, I expected it to be a hotbed. You know, I had come out of Voorhees, and there was a lot of activity and action and a lot of students involved. And, you know, we come from—I guess Booker T. Washington schools were considered to be the kind of blue-collar schools, you know, the kind of laborers and workers and those kind of schools. And I didn't know that there was a kind of professional, white-collar, kind of bourgeois campus like I discovered at Howard.

And so, it was common for us to wear jeans to school. And coming out of the South, your hair was a little bit longer than the average who had the skinned-down and all that other kind of hairdos. And so, that was a kind of contentious kind of relationship that I had with Howard that people had some difficulty with my wearing jeans at Howard. The young men wore pants, slacks, and shirts. And it was—if you were really very spiffy and [0:30:00] upbeat, you would—at lunch you would change your shirt. You know, you wouldn't go back to class with the same shirt on.

JD: So, they were striving to become members of—?

CS: They were striving to become part of the status quo.

JD: Yeah.

CS: And we were saying, essentially, that we need to be opening that whole process up. We don't need to be trying to be the token. And so, that's the way I felt that my experience would be there, that I would be groomed to be up-and-up.

JD: You discovered the Nonviolent Action Group, NAG.

CS: Yes.

JD: Talk about your activities there, what kinds of things you were doing, who you were with.

CS: Well, I was, for a long time, trying to find that niche. And then, I found maybe Mike Thelwell, some of the others, and Stanley Wise, and they told me about a meeting that they were having. And I said, "Okay, well, I'll come to the meeting," and went to the meeting. And there was a group of maybe fifteen or twenty. It grew after I joined and some of the others joined. It was Charlie Cobb and a number of other folk. Plus, there was a SNCC office in Washington, D.C., and it would have—you know, Ivanhoe Donaldson and some of the other field staff would be coming through periodically.

But what we were committed to was learning more about the Movement in the South and trying to address issues that needed to be addressed, communicating information. For an example, the whole issue about protection of voting rights and civil rights workers in the South. We ended up going to the Justice Department and picketing. We ended up at the FBI and picketing. We ended up at the White House and picketing. That was our job and that was our role.

But we also had issues that were germane to D.C. Home rule was one of those issues. The busses—I think it was run by a guy by the name of Chalk, as I remember it—and desegregating of the busses and the employment of black drivers and that kind of thing. So, we tried to mobilize the school to respond to those kinds of things. And one of the things we recognized was that you had to be in those critical places at the school in order for you to be effective in communicating. So, we had people who went on *The Hilltop*—that was the newspaper, the student newspaper—the Lyceum program, the student government association, and many of the organizations. We wanted to have people—

JD: So, you were infiltrating? [Laughs]

CS: Infiltrated all those things and actually began to have that kind of impact, and we began to try to target those kinds of things. On the Lyceum program, we started out trying to secure the services of Bayard Rustin.

JD: Um-hmm.

CS: And the administration backed up, because Bayard was supposed to be a socialist.

JD: Yeah.

CS: And we kept pushing, and we kept pushing, and we kept pushing, and we actually got Bayard there. After these programs, we would have an opportunity to have a kind of one-on-one with whoever that speaker was. And we had a one-on-one with Bayard about tactics and history and all those other kinds of things. We recognized Bayard as being a good organizer and we weren't about to try to take that away from him.

And so, when you get around to the March on Washington, then Bayard reached back to get some of us and some of the other SNCCers to work on the March, on the logistics. A couple of weeks before the March, we were in D.C., and we had the responsibility for various and sundry kinds of logistics: moving people around, crowds, setting up the designated areas for people to arrive and marshaling them from the Washington Monument down to the Lincoln Memorial, those kinds of things, even making the signs and making the sandwiches. So, we had those assignments, and that was a unique opportunity and experience.

But before we even got there, we also decided that, once we were successful with Bayard, that we would go for Malcolm. And we were able to push the school on the Malcolm issue, and Malcolm actually came to the campus. Had a wonderful presentation; the auditorium was absolutely filled. And after it was over, we had an opportunity to talk with Malcolm.

JD: What did—the conversation was interesting, because at that phase of his life, he didn't have many kind things to say about the Civil Rights Movement.

CS: That's absolutely correct. So, you know, we had that kind of debate and we pushed [0:35:00] on those kinds of issues. And I think that one of the things that—Malcolm used to refer to us as "the students of the Movement." You know, "the students of the Movement," that's how he referred to that whole group. And we used to run into each other, and I'm talking about with the SNCCers, in Washington frequently and we would always stop and have that discussion about, you know, what was going on.

Matter of fact, when the March on Washington was going on, Malcolm was in Washington, and he called it the "Farce on Washington" and he talked about the "Big Six" and all that other kind of stuff.

JD: The only time he met King in person, I think, was at the March on Washington.

CS: Yes, at the airport.

JD: Yeah, yeah.

CS: Um-hmm, and they just kind of ran into each other. It wasn't planned or anything.

JD: The March—Bayard Rustin was the principal organizer, and it was to be a protest march. But it didn't really turn out that way.

CS: Yeah.

JD: Talk about your feelings about you've done all this work, you've done all this organization, you've got hundreds of thousands of people there.

CS: Well, I think that for many of us, even including the SNCCers, you know, we were on the edge. And it was a fledgling kind of movement of SNCC at this point. You know, we're still in an infant stage, even though we have been in Albany and we've been in Danville and

we've been a lot of other areas. We were growing. And you had a small number of people involved in SNCC at that point, on a regular basis, on a full-time basis. So, we were using a lot of students who would come during the summer, or come during a spring break, or whenever it was. And so, we hadn't really gotten to the point where we're talking about full-time organizers working in any particular area. So, the March on Washington was one of those learning periods. John Lewis's speech, for an example, the changing of that speech.

JD: What was so controversial about it that it needed to be changed?

CS: Well, there was some objection—one of the cardinals, O'Boyle, I think is his name, he was concerned that John used the language that we would go through the South "like Sherman," and "burning the vestiges of segregation to the ground."

JD: Wonderful metaphor! [Laughs]

CS: I understand, but they said, "Too violent, too—

JD: Yeah.

CS: You know, and "It's going to create more." And I think, you know, just Southerners objected to that kind of terminology. But the critical piece was that A. Philip Randolph actually came to the SNCCers and said, "You know, I've been working on this ever since 1940. I'm close to having a dream fulfilled. Can you help me with this? And I really would appreciate it if you would make that." And I think, out of our, I guess, commitment to a kind of person whose shoulders we were standing on, we said that we would actually make those changes and not feel any guilt about that.

But I think that was also a critical point for the organization, because then we had to come to the conclusion that we had to—if we had voice, we had to be able to control it and we had to be able to live up to it. So, after that, you didn't have people kind of coming in and saying,

"This is what you need, and that's what you need. And would you change your position for the sake of me or anything else?"

So, we were very idealistic. And so, we thought that the March would have the kind of impact that it may have, and that is getting the message out about civil rights, education, you know, health, welfare, employment—those are the kinds of things. And we also saw that as the first real time that, on a national scale, you had the coalition of civil rights, church, and kind of democratic liberalism that would kind of come together for that particular thing. And so, there was a euphoria, I think, for many of us. We were tired, exhausted. We had worked very hard. And there was a kind of euphoria.

And we were in a kind of ideal world, in terms of now. You know, after Montgomery, and after all the things that had gone on, including [0:40:00] Medgar Evers, and the students in Birmingham, and the horses and the dogs and the fire hoses, and all that kind of stuff, that we had actually found a way to bring some kind of, not closure, but bring some consolidation of all those things. And the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing kind of destroyed all of that. And so, you're back to the real world.

And I think that at that point, you know, our eyes began to open up, and we knew that we had to get back to real business. But we also, for many of us of the Emmett Till generation, recognized that we probably couldn't do this as part-time. And so, we had to make some serious decisions about going full-time with civil rights, or leaving that to who could go full-time and get busy about our academics. You couldn't do both.

JD: So, when did you drop out of Howard?

JB: Excuse me.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

CS: Okay.

JD: So, you were realizing that you were going to have to be full-time. When did you leave Howard to drop out of college?

CS: Yeah. We were assigned by Bob Moses, we being NAG, to be responsible for generating and getting volunteers for the summer of '64. And we also understood that we would be committing ourselves, so all of NAG, probably 90 percent of NAG, would go down. But we had to recruit from the University of Maryland, Morgan State, George Washington, Georgetown, American University. Those schools in that Maryland-D.C. cluster would be the schools that we would actually recruit from.

And one of the unique parts about the recruitment that we were doing is that most of the students that we were recruiting were going to be African Americans. There were whites in there that actually went down from that area, but we would have the largest contingency of African American volunteers that would go down. And so, we kind of leveraged that to get into the Second Congressional District of Mississippi, which was the plantation area, and that was the Black Belt of Mississippi. And we felt like if we could get into those areas we could be much more effective in trying to get down in and get these communities to kind of empower them to organize and to put us out of our job, put us out of work.

But I probably knew as soon as I made the commitment to go to Mississippi that that would probably be it. So, I finished the semester at Howard, but most of that time, at the end of that semester, I was in Cambridge, Maryland.

JD: Talk about the Cambridge Movement. It became very violent, with Gloria Richardson leading it.

CS: Yeah. Well, Cambridge, when we first went over, was basically trying to organize the community to have protests in that community. And each time, the protest ended up in some kind of violent scuffle, and at a point there, you had martial law in Cambridge. And then, the opposition in Cambridge invited in George Wallace. We were in—I was in Cambridge at that particular time, and the National Guard was in charge. I, along with Stokely [Carmichael] and Stanley Wise and Gloria were arrested and kept in a National Guard Armory overnight. We were freed the next day.

But at that point, the Cambridge Movement itself, there were elements in it that wanted to strike out, and there was efforts made to kind of contain that. But Gloria was a little bit more radical than most people had expected. And she was one of those—first, she was a Howard graduate, so that was one of the connections that she had with NAG. And so, she was able to get additional NAG—John Batiste from Howard actually goes up, and Reggie Robinson is in Cambridge, Maryland.

And then, it got to the point where Robert Kennedy [0:45:00] wanted to intercede and see if he could find a remedy for Cambridge. And so, I think what he ended up doing was extending the martial law. It stayed in place for a little over a year in Cambridge, and they began to have some dialogues between the community about desegregation of Cambridge. So, during that spring is when Wallace came to Cambridge.

And the National Guard had this tear gas, I don't know if they had some kind of combination mixture of tear gas and some elements or chemicals that actually made you nauseated, you know. And so, we had all these things going on at the same time. Cliff Vaughs, one of the photographers for SNCC, was actually arrested, and some way he was hit with a bayonet through the calf of his leg. So, it was a very scary night, when the tear gas was used, you

had these young National Guardsmen out there, and they just—kind of the police brutality kind of thing, and throwing everybody in the truck, and we were all arrested, and that kind of thing. And we ended up going to the stockade, as I said, and we were released.

The general in charge of that operation, I think his name was Gelson, and he was trying to negotiate this stuff, and he's an Army general. He's trying to be a police chief, and so it got real confusing and complex. At that point, that's when, I think, Robert Kennedy interceded. Now, what we were trying to do is we were trying to have a march from the black section of Cambridge over to the—I think it was at the National Guard Armory where George Wallace was speaking. And that's how this whole thing kind of got out of whack over there.

I left Cambridge, went back to Howard to try to finish up my semester and prepare to go to Mississippi for that summer, because we were not only trying to recruit student activists to go to Mississippi, we were also trying to get automobiles and other resources that we would take to Mississippi. So, I think we ended up having two or three cars donated, all of which we drove out. And then, in June, we drove out to Ohio for the orientation.

JD: Freedom Summer was a project that SNCC and COFO, Council of Federated Organizations, initiated in part because the federal government was not paying attention to all the abuses in Mississippi. And the idea was that by inviting upwards of 1,000 volunteers to spend their summers in Mississippi, it would shine a spotlight on the state and force the federal government to do something, among other things. Freedom Summer became international news when three civil rights workers, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney, were abducted and killed by the Klan. What people, most people, think is then the FBI came in, and all you hear about is the FBI. But it was very interesting that you and other people who had just come to Mississippi were out looking for them. They had disappeared. Their bodies would

not be found for months. Talk about going into Mississippi and who was there and how you went about looking.

CS: Well, when we get out to Ohio, Miami University at Ohio, or in Ohio, we had the orientation session set up and we were going through the orientation sessions. And then, we got some information that a church had been burned to the ground in Philadelphia. And so, Michael Schwerner and—Michael "Mickey" Schwerner, and Chaney, and they had to pick someone, a volunteer, to go along with them, or they wanted to pick a volunteer to go along with them. And so, they got Goodman as a volunteer, who volunteered to go, and they were going to go back and investigate the church burning. And so, they left. And we actually saw them off, and they were gone.

And they went back to Meridian, checked in. [0:50:00] They went straight from Meridian over to Philadelphia. And they didn't return to Philadelphia, so we got an alert that they were missing. And so, we gave it about maybe 12 or 24 hours. And then, that's when, I think, many of us knew that they didn't respond to any of the security messages and all, that something deadly probably had happened to them.

Bob assembled—Bob Moses assembled all of the folk there. And he said, "I have you here because I want to let you know that three of our volunteers, who were here yesterday, have been missing." And that he had concluded, as many of the other seasoned veterans, that they were dead. And that many people sitting in the room had a choice, a decision to make, and that is whether or not they still wanted to go to Mississippi, in spite of the fact that there are three people who were like you that are already dead. And at that point, he said that he was still going and he hoped that everybody else would go.

And at that point, there was a real quiet in the room, and I think that Jean Wheeler actually gets up and says, starts singing a song, and everybody kind of marches out. Well, when everybody marches out, a collective of us get together with Bob, and we said that we are going to go into Philadelphia and we can see what may have happened. And so, that consisted of, I think it was Featherstone, and Donna Moses, Bob Moses's wife at that time, Gwen Roberts, I think was her name, Stokely, Charlie Cobb, I think it was Featherstone, and myself. We got in four different cars and we said that we would enter the state from four different directions.

Stokely and Charlie were in one car, and they came in through Arkansas. There was another group that came in through Alabama. We came in through northern Mississippi, down the Mississippi Trace, I think that's what it's called. And there was another group that came in through Memphis. And that we would all meet in Meridian. And once we got into Meridian, we'd get together. And there would be some farmers who would go out during the day to see if they could find places that bodies would be hidden or where hostages might have been held.

JD: You still held out some hope, didn't you?

CS: Well, you always have that in the back of your mind. But, you know, in reality we were thinking about bodies that we may find more than we would hostages. And so, we all left Meridian and drove up to Philadelphia at night. And during the day, we would be up in the loft of a barn. And at night, somebody would come by in a truck, and they'd pick us up and they'd take us out. And they'd give us a map, and we'd go out and into the valleys and into old houses and all that kind of stuff and see if there was any signs that hostages were held there or any of that kind thing.

We had no lights. We couldn't wear belts, because the buckles would glare. And there were fire towers all over, across the South. That was one of the safety things that were set up, so

that people go up the tower, and they could look out over the flatland, and they could see where there was any smoke or fire, and they could get to it quickly. So, we had to be very concerned about those kinds of things. And after a certain period of time, we would come back, maybe three hours, something like that, they would come back and pick us up. We'd go back to the house and we'd sleep until—and kind of stir around, but we couldn't let people know that we were there.

JD: How many nights were you doing this?

CS: We did that for—I think it was two nights we were out there. And then, we had a discussion. We used to have discussions [0:55:00] all the time about what we were doing, and our commitment to the Movement, and our friends and how we felt like they were really a part of us, kind of comrades in arms, you know. And so, we began to feel as if we were being compromised, in terms of our being out there, and we didn't want to have the pressure come on the farmers who were going out looking and transporting us and the people where we were staying.

So, we pulled the plug on it after the second night and said that we were going back to Meridian. And then, we'd all be dispersed to our respective project areas, and Featherstone and I went to Holly Springs.

JD: Tell us about Holly Springs. What kind of a place was it? What did you find there?

CS: Holly Springs was a community in which there were two colleges, two HBCUs. One was in decline, and the other one is still very vibrant and still there now. We found a community that was—had a lot of hope in that community. We found that among many of the people who were there. There had been some other folk in Holly Springs before we got there. I think, um, what's his name? McLemore. Actually graduated from—

JD: Leslie, yeah, at Rust.

CS: Graduated from Rust, yeah. And so, there had been some organizers in Holly Springs before we actually got there. But because we had the largest project, and I'm talking about, we took in, I think it was five or six counties, including Oxford, which was Fayette County, and Marshall County, and many of the other counties, Union County, in that area, that we probably had one of the larger staffs there. It must have been about twelve or thirteen. We had three master's student teachers out of Boston. We had a nurse, so we could do clinical work and prevention. We could actually go out and have her examine people sometimes who may not have been able to access a doctor and that kind of thing. And we were able to establish a Freedom School. We operated a community center and had activities in for the young people. And we actually solicited the largest number of applications for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. And we also represented in larger proportion because we had more delegates that went to the state convention and later to Atlantic City. But that was what the project was like. We had an editor from the *Crimson*, who—

JD: The Harvard *Crimson*?

CS: Yes, who was Peter Cummings, I think was his name, and we had a little newsletter that we put together. We kept meticulous records of our work there in, out of Holly Springs.

JD: Who was the project director there?

CS: The project director was—started out being Ivanhoe, and then I took over as project director and was official project director.

JD: That was in the fall?

CS: Yeah. Ivanhoe left after the summer.

JD: Yeah.

CS: And so, I took over after the summer and was project director.

JD: What sort of reaction did you get from the white community for this invasion of all these outside agitators?

CS: Well, Holly Springs was in the north, and it was more moderate in Holly Springs than it was in other places.

JD: It was not a Delta city?

CS: It was not a Delta. It wasn't—it certainly wasn't Southwest. Southwest was just, you know, clandestine groups and shootings and, you know, arbitrary killings and that kind of things were common. We did have fire bombings and school burnings and church burnings and all that kind of thing, but generally not the kind of individual, you know, people getting killed at night or lynched or any of those kinds of things. Those things did not happen. We did have Freedom Days, in which we actually took people down, and their names ended up in the newspaper.

JD: You took them down to register to vote?

CS: Register to vote. And we went along with our people, though, every time they went down, to make sure that things were handled very well.

JD: Did anybody get registered that summer?

CS: We had a couple of people that got registered, not very many.

JD: Yeah.

CS: It just wasn't going to work. It wasn't going to happen. [1:00:00] But we did have a number of Freedom Days, in which people were actually taken down. They just didn't register them. But we had tremendous success in getting young people involved and engaged. We had a number of students that we sent off to college at the end of 1965. We had colleges that were willing to accept students if we referred them to them. Roy DeBerry was one of those students.

He ended up being a council member down in Jackson for a long period of time. He was a young kid when we came along, and we kept providing the kind of nurturing and education that we thought he needed, and he turned out to be quite a success.

We had a local project director shortly after I left, and that was Rita and her husband in Holly Springs. They were locals. They started out when we started out in the beginning of the summer, and Rita became an excellent organizer and community leader. She died, and her husband took over for a couple of minutes and stayed around for a period of time. We saw our job as going into communities and actually organizing those communities so that the leadership for giving direction to and organizing would be turned over to the local people. We were trying to work our way out of a job. So, I never felt bad about leaving when I did, because I knew Rita was very much capable and very competent to run that.

Holly Springs became a fairly progressive city, in that they were able to elect a black mayor in the ’90s and they were able to work out a kind of coexistence with the sheriff and the police chief in that city. I understand the police chief has just a bevy of film, of photos, from that summer. But he won’t release them and he won’t—he’ll show them to some people who go down and ask about them. But I understand that he has a treasure trove full of records.

JD: That would be a project for somebody to put together.

CS: Right. And we’ve had several reunions of the group from Holly Springs, and we have a large number of volunteers who come back. We had collected all the material that we had on that, notes and newsletters and all that kind of thing, and we put that, we archived that at Rust College. So, those records are there, with photographs and all that, including the reunions. And so, Larry Rubin was one of the people in that project there. And we had a number of people—the

attorney for President Clinton on the—what did they call them? They were going to de—what were they going to do with Clinton? There were going to take him out of office.

JD: Oh, to impeach, yeah.

CS: Impeach! The one that was his private attorney was on the project there in Holly Springs.

JD: Oh, really?

CS: So, we just chat about those kinds of things throughout the years about the various and sundry experience. Hardy Frye was also a producer on one of the documentaries on Mississippi that summer. He and Connie Field and a couple of others did the movie *Where Do We Go from Here?*

JD: No, *Freedom on My Mind*.

CS: *Freedom on My Mind*, yes, *Freedom on My Mind*. And so, we've had a lot of very positive things come out of that experience in Holly Springs.

JD: Yeah. You mentioned the organizing for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The idea was to get a representation to go to Atlantic City to challenge the legitimacy of the seating of the all-white segregationist party. Blacks were not permitted to participate in that. Talk a little bit about Atlantic City and your time there and your reactions to everything.

CS: Okay. The Atlantic City experience was very interesting because, you know, we managed to box up all of the applications that we had received. [1:05:00] We actually had what we called [1:05:06] logs on the experiences of that summer, where we kind of documented every event that went on. We even documented the fact that the Democratic Party in the state of Mississippi was not loyal. It didn't vote for the Democratic Party ticket in the presidential election in 1960. They didn't just deny blacks an opportunity to come to the precinct meetings

and all that; they usually shifted it away. They wouldn't tell you where they were being held in some instances. And so, they were not just discriminatory. They just outright said, "No. Blacks would not be in that."

The idea was to follow the procedures of the Democratic Party in electing delegates to represent the state of Mississippi going forward. And what we were able to do is we were able to document that we followed that procession: the precinct meetings, the district meetings, the state meeting, and the election of delegations, open elections, democratic process. The state chose not to use that and made it very clear that they were not going to use that.

I had the pleasure, I guess, of taking the bell off of the church in Philadelphia that was burned. We put that on top of the truck. And we had the burned-out station wagon on the back of the truck. So, we took every visual—

JD: You were able to get the station wagon from the FBI, yeah.

CS: We were able to get the station wagon. We put it on the back of the truck. And we took both of those things up and we had that on display so people could actually see it. And we had a caption on the bottom of it of what that actually was.

JB: Which car? Which station wagon was this?

CS: This was the station wagon that Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney were in when they were arrested and later murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi. And what happened was they took the station wagon out—the sheriff and the deputies and the rest of the folk took it out to kind of a dirt road, and they burned it up. And that's what we had. So, we wanted to let people see the level of violence and destruction that people were willing to resort to in order to maintain the system of segregation. And we all set those things up so people could see. And we kind of

followed the delegation around in order to make sure that they could maneuver through whatever they needed to maneuver through—

JD: And the Johnson—

CS: And they would be at the right place at the right time. And what we discovered was, initially, as the delegates moved around other delegates, they seemed to get a lot of support. And then, I think the issue became—it began to look like for the Democratic Party that it was going to be an issue that was much larger than what they expected. So, the Johnson administration decided that they needed to have a person in charge of making sure that the convention would not be disrupted against the president. And so, he delegated that responsibility to Hubert Humphrey, who then delegated it to Mondale.

And, you know, they decided that there needed to be a compromise, because the delegates from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was asking to be seated *in place of* and replacing—and they were building that on a moral case. They were committed to the Democratic Party, they were not discriminatory, they had a diverse delegation that was there, and they wanted to be considered citizens like everybody else. The issue that they were willing to push for is the right to vote for everybody, and they figured that if they had gotten the right to vote that they probably would have been in the ranks of the Democratic Party. So, they were loyal in that sense.

And the—when it got time to decide on what was going to happen with those issues, Mondale and Humphrey came up with the idea that they would be granted two seats at large. And those were with, I think, [1:10:00] either the New Jersey or the Connecticut delegation. They had accepted the fact that they would be there. And they came back to the delegation to say that this is what we are prepared to give. And at that point, the delegation was to meet. But

before they met, they had this bevy of coalition folk from the March on Washington speak to the delegation to try to convince them that that was, in fact, a victory. Dr. King and Whitney Young and somebody from—I can't remember all the names of the people. It must have been nineteen or twenty people that spoke in a church before this delegation.

But what—when Johnson actually found, President Johnson actually found out that this was going to be a serious offense is when Fannie Lou Hamer spoke. And she was about to speak on national TV, and at that same moment, he called a press conference that took the press away from that. And some of the major networks decided to go ahead and run that tape later on that night, because President Johnson didn't have anything to talk about at that particular press conference. And that's the speech where Fannie Lou Hamer said, "I question America. If you don't, you know, seat this democratically elected and selected delegation, where are we in America?"

And after the meeting and all of that kind of stuff, all of the, I guess, labor-liberal kind of folk left. The delegation was sitting there, and they had to decide whether or not they were going to accept the compromise. And after meeting, I think it was Fannie Lou Hamer who said that, you know, we've worked too hard and we've come too far to accept that compromise. And we came here to be seated, and we're not going be seated. And we'll go home and start over again and continue this process to see if we can get the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party represented in the Democratic Party as a legitimate entity.

JD: So, how did you all feel after this? You had gone up there. You had been given a compromise that wasn't acceptable. Your liberal friends in the North were not accommodating.

CS: Oh, no! We were very proud about the position taken by the Mississippi delegation, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegation. But we were devastated about the fact

that, inside of the Democratic Party, morality wasn't the basis upon which decisions are made. It's power politics at its rawest. And we hadn't—we were still very idealistic about, you know, if we do the right things and if we follow the procedures, then good things will happen to you. That wasn't the case. And so, it was devastating. And at that point, I think folk in SNCC began to put all of those elements, including the Democratic Party, to the side. These are not going to be the vehicles that we can ride in order to get to freedom, justice, and equality.

And then, there was the search on then for where do we go from here, in terms of the transition from the old-line politics of working within the Democratic Party and working within with these coalitions that we currently had. And so, that's when we began to look at the possibility of establishing links with other minority groups and see if we could talk about empowerment and self-determination, and those kinds of issues were issues that we were beginning to look at.

And we were beginning to move outside of the mainstream of just looking within America. We began to look at other movements that were going on in Asia and Africa and South America and the West Indies—not the West Indies, but in the South America basin, Gulf basin down there. And so, we began to look at what was going on in Cuba and we began to send people down there, and Russia, and Asia, and a number of other places where there were independent movements—in Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau and Guinea and all those places [1:15:00] where movements were actually going.

JD: So, SNCC is undergoing some transformation?

CS: Going through transformation, absolutely!

JD: And then, we have the Selma campaign of '65. SNCC had been in Selma for several years.

CS: Yep.

JD: And Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference chose Selma as the spot where they were going to stage demonstrations and push for the passage of a voting rights law.

CS: Right.

JD: When did you get to Selma? And what did you do there?

CS: I was in Mississippi, as we were having a state MFDP meeting there. But before that, we had had a staff meeting, and the issue of Selma came up. And most of us agreed that there was a difference in—a strategic difference between SNCC and SCLC, and that is that we believed in building organization, as opposed to mobilizing for some particular objective. And John raised the question about Selma. And he said it was in Alabama and it was, you know, it was close to his hometown, and that he wanted to participate.

JD: This is John Lewis?

CS: John Lewis, yeah. And we took the position that, "John, we are not going to be engaged in the demonstration in Selma." First, we didn't know of the strategic plan that had been put together between SCLC and the Johnson administration. We didn't know that, if that push got going, that the Voting Rights Act was going to be tied to how effective that was. And so, we said, "John, you cannot *independently*," because that's what he was talking about, "as chairman of SNCC, be a part of this march." And John said that he reserved the right to be able to, on conscience, be able to go on this march. And so, I think the conclusion was, was that, "John, we really don't want you to do this. But if you do this, we will have some SNCC people there with you." So, you see Bob Mants is with John on this march.

And then, when John goes over the bridge, John ends up suffering a concussion and is actually kind of airlifted out of Selma to Boston in order for him to get the head checked out for the concussion and see how severe that was. Now, *anytime* anybody in SNCC is ever injured or wounded or is in jail or whatever it is, the philosophy of the organization was, was that we send somebody in right away. And so, when we were called in the afternoon of Bloody Sunday, we immediately called together some of the people who were at the assembly and found out who had vehicles, who could go, and how many people were going to be in the vehicles. And then, we launched those people for Selma almost immediately.

So, it was a period of probably between an hour, an hour-and-a-half before people were actually leaving that convention going to Selma. And once we got to Selma, Jim was coming down from Atlanta. He was flying in. I think he got a helicopter.

JD: Jim Foreman?

CS: Yeah. He got a helicopter, or some kind of way, he got something to fly into Selma. And so, we all got there. We knew where we were supposed to be going. We met there. And we were told that there was nothing left to be done. We got an update on John. And we said, the next day, we would spread out and begin to work through the process of what would be the next steps. We were still kind of ambivalent about being there, but the injury to John—that has always been an operational principle. If one among our ranks had some difficulty, we would rush in and try to provide the kind of support and try to continue the work that they were doing until they could either recover or we could find a replacement for them.

I took over the logistical parts, and that is, [1:20:00] trying to work with Hosea and the other logistical people in SCLC on where the march was to go. And we also brought in Willie Ricks, who could mobilize the young people. And so, we wanted to keep the pressure on. Now,

if we hadn't used all of our resources to build up support for the march, we would. And then, we had that issue with the injunction to march, the injunction from Johnson, I think it was, federal judge. And the question was whether or not Dr. King was going to violate that injunction. And I think he concluded that he was going to violate that injunction.

But when he marched, he marched across the bridge and then turned around and came back to the church. And that kind of threw everybody off. And, to be honest with you, it pissed most of SNCC off, because nobody told us what the plan was. And here we are operating, and we don't have a sense of plan. So, at this point, Jim decides to go down to Montgomery and start another set of demonstrations in Montgomery, and kind of make sure that we understand that there's a connection between that. But we'll do that in Montgomery and create the kind of protest down in Montgomery.

And that started, and we began to try to work out and try to find out what is going on here. I mean, why is it that we are not informed about the objectives? And so, we kind of worked through that, and we got a time and a date that we were going to actually start out of Selma, and we worked the logistics out to get the march all the way into Montgomery. There is a point in which Jim and some other folk are in Montgomery—this is the leadership group—and Jim is talking about knocking the legs out from under the table if everybody can't be equal around that table.

JD: Yeah.

CS: And I think that it became very clear that there was some missing information and links that we didn't have. But we figured that, you know, once the march got into Selma, that would be over with, and we'll move on. And we did not know about Johnson's speech after that about the Voting Rights Act and "We Shall Overcome" and then, later, the passage of the Voting

Rights Act. So, that was kind of tense in there, but it wasn't tense because we didn't like people. It was tense because we were on different pages about where we were, in terms of protest.

And we had been in Selma for two years prior to SCLC coming in there, and we knew that a march would only last maybe thirty days after the march had concluded and that people would dissipate because you hadn't organized them into anything. And that was our real concern. We were trying to build in Selma. And we stayed there and we continued and we did build a little something in Selma. But that was because we went to the next plan, and that is building independent political organizations.

JD: Okay, talk a little bit about Lowndes County and how that represented a change for SNCC, in terms of—

CS: Right.

JB: Before you start—

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're on.

JD: Okay. One of the effects of the Selma March was that Stokely Carmichael and others went through Lowndes County, and they started organizing people there. And the result was a project for SNCC after that, where a number of SNCC field secretaries were leaving Mississippi and other projects, because they saw something different happening there. Tell me a little bit about Lowndes County and your experience.

CS: Okay. We did go through Lowndes County, and everywhere we went, we knew that we had to do something a little different in terms of a march, and not have just a group of people marching down a highway, that we had to get people along the highway to at least get involved in and actually understand what is going on. So, it was a fertile area. It was part of the Black Belt

in Alabama. Stokely was pretty disenchanted, as many of us were, with the response that we had received from the Democratic Party with the challenge. And we were looking for other ways in which we could actually organize for political power. We called it individual, I mean, independent political organizing, and we were looking at Lowndes County, Alabama. [1:25:00]

But we had a pretty healthy and sturdy research department back in Atlanta. And Jack Minnis actually goes through the laws in Alabama, and he finds that you can actually organize an independent party in a particular county in Alabama. This was a part of law that was passed during the Civil War era and said that we could actually go in and organize a separate party in the state of Alabama in any county, but there were certain requirements that you must go through. So, we used that to begin to look at organizing in Lowndes County, in Dallas County, in Greene County, and there's another county in Alabama. I can't remember what the name of that one is. And we started out with Lowndes County.

Now, at that point, SNCC doesn't have the kind of resources it had for 1964. The resources have already begun to decline. And so, the job and the task for making resources available fell on me. And so, what I did was I got other SNCCers to go into Lowndes County to work along with Stokely, and into other counties, and the majority of those folk were the NAG people who had come down in the summer of '64 who were still working, some in Mississippi and some in other places. And we put those in, and we got some out of Georgia, Southwest Georgia, to move into that area, because we didn't have a lot of people who transferred in from Mississippi. Those people that left out of Mississippi generally went home or went on some other mission.

But we were also trying to pare down the organization because, after the summer of '64, SNCC ended up taking in about seventy to eighty of those volunteers, and there were a couple of

dynamic changes that took place in SNCC. One was that we got up to a membership that was over a hundred. And we also went from being a predominantly black organization to a predominantly white organization. And that created some ideological and philosophical concerns in the organization, also. But what happens is that the stepping-up and the escalation of the antiwar movement drained off a lot of those folk who were in SNCC, because that became the exciting kind of, in-your-face kind of mobilizing that many people began to shift off to.

But it was Jack who came up with the idea and the plan. And we took that plan and went to Lowndes County and organized what was called the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, the same kind of acronym, same kind of freedom that we're talking about. But we were talking about empowerment now. That was one of the things that came out of Mississippi, that people wanted to empower themselves, and we thought that this was one of the ways in which we could actually do that. We were trying to create a new model, another model, that could be employed and taken outside of Lowndes County to urban areas, and wherever else we were, to find those pockets where African Americans were the majority and see if we could use that to leverage coalition politics with a kind of sound, solid foundation in the African American community.

So, we used limited resources, and they began to organize the Lowndes County organization. And the Democratic Party found out what was going on, and I think that that influence on the media at that point made people begin to refer to the Lowndes County Freedom Organization as the Black Panther Party. And so, that was supposed to be a negative, and everybody was supposed to say, "Oh, this is not going to work." But for the African American community, that was a very positive kind of thing.

And so, we would—during the period where there were going to be elections, and we had organized campaigns and actually got people on the ballot, and they were running for elections,

we solicited young men from Philadelphia and Chicago and New York and California to come down, just to be poll watchers and to help drive people around [1:30:00] and to do those kinds of things. And so, many of them came down, and when they went back to those respective communities, they considered themselves to be the Friends of the Black Panther Party. And so, this is how the notion of Black Panther gets out to California and Chicago and in New York. And all over these areas, you can find that some kind of organization that's supposed to be Black Panthers were created.

So, it's not a strain for us to understand that Bobby Seale—and Bobby Seale has now admitted—used the Lowndes County model as the kind of model that they were going to employ in California, in Oakland, to actually empower that particular community and then spread out with the Black Panther Parties going in other directions, basically on kind of standard traditional politics.

JD: So, you were organizing there, and elections were held, and although blacks were in a majority, they did not win. What went on with the elections?

CS: I think that we didn't have the confidence in all of the people in Lowndes County to go out and vote. The *next* election that was held, they won most of the offices. So, it was just a matter of going through it the first time around. But you can explain that to people, and they can actually see. One of the things that we always did was SNCC, as an organization, provided information. So, we put together these little booklets that people could actually see, with black people on the cover in that precinct, Lowndes County. And we also talked about the role and responsibility for the sheriff, the qualifications for a sheriff, so that people would feel confident that, if they had those very simple qualifications, that they could be a candidate for that particular

office. And so, it was a defeat because we were just getting people acclimated to the idea of empowerment and the importance of the vote.

And actually, in lockstep, I think we find that that kind of apprehension was eliminated through these kinds of efforts back here when you have the 2008 and the 2012 elections, with the African American vote, because people assumed that there was still going to be that kind of apprehension, and they weren't coming out to vote. And I just observed in the 2012 that people, even people who were considered to be those who would *never vote*, because they have some kind of dereliction or they had some kind of issue, and they would take that day off—it would almost be like their birthday—they would be straight, and they'd be in that line, and because Obama said to stay until you vote, they were willing to do that. You know, all the agitation, say, "Don't go for the okey-doke. Don't get out of line. Stay there until you vote." Then after you vote, you're on your own.

But I think, what I'm saying is, is that, yeah, the first time around that wasn't successful. The second time around, they actually won office, and the school board, and the city council, and later mayor. I can't think of the name of the town now in Lowndes County, but one of the cities in Lowndes elected a black mayor. And so, you began to see that shift take place. Again, by this time, there's an upheaval in—in—well, let me just take that one back. I'm thinking too far in advance.

JD: Well, let's—go ahead with that.

CS: But what I am—where I'm going is, is that, while the election is coming back around, and they're organizing and still going on in Alabama, one of the things that happens is that Sammy Younge is killed in January of 1966, and SNCC responds by putting out a statement against the war in Vietnam. And so, you begin to see that whole notion that I had talked about

earlier about tying into becoming more international and tying into groups that are working on self-determination, and we see some of that as some of what it is that we are trying to do in the communities in which we are working.

JD: If we can move here to—and we've taken too much of your time, so we're going to wrap this up soon. But I would like for you to talk about, [1:35:00] as you've written about, SNCC is undergoing all kinds of changes.

CS: Absolutely.

JD: And by 1967, it's in a real crisis. Would you talk about that and your observations as a member of the group then?

CS: Well, several things happened. One is, is that we had been successful, clearly, and success has a tendency to make people move on. And I'm talking about successful in terms of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, the 1965 Voting Rights Bill, widespread desegregation. You're talking about the widespread participation in the voting process, registering to vote, numbers of people coming on, empowerments of groups that were marginalized for a long period of time. So, these are the kinds of victories that you have to recognize that are taking place. And you can go all the way back through that period with the long view of the Movement and see a number of victories if you use that perspective.

The other thing is, is that working in areas like Mississippi and Alabama, where you do have the shooting in Lowndes County and Reverend Reeb is killed, a seminarian, and the other Catholic priest is wounded, that you can do about two years. And after two years, you probably need to retool and remove the tapes and all that kind of stuff, because you just can't do it. It's too much. It's too much of an emotional kind of strain that's not good for the—for you, for the individual.

And you begin to see other kinds of things happening. One is, is that you begin to see the emphasis shift away from civil rights to the antiwar movement for many young white students, and so, there's a shifting away there. You also begin to see the whole notion about empowerment, Black Power, coming on. And the perception is, in how Black Power is actually projected, comes from a position paper of the Atlanta Project, *never officially voted on by SNCC*. It was *not* the position paper on Black Power from SNCC. And what happens in that position paper is that it's a very narrow view about a kind of black-white kind of analysis and, you know, "whites feel superior to blacks, and blacks now should put whites out of the organization," all that kind of stuff. That was never the basis upon which Black Power was brought into view, because our assessment and analysis was much larger than just a color, skin-color kind of analysis. And we fought that argument. We fought that argument in SNCC. But the status quo bought into another idea, so many young people were moving away.

JD: There were newer people coming in, too, didn't you?

CS: Newer people coming in. We didn't have a way to educate those newer people about even the more recent history. So, people were coming in, they didn't know anything about the Freedom Riders, and "jail, no bail," and that whole history and that experience. So, you had new people coming in, and it was just extremely difficult for the organization to move forward. Plus, we—you know, I hear a lot of people that underestimate the impact of COINTELPRO.

JD: Yeah, the government.

CS: COINTELPRO had a massive effect and impact on people. I ended up in prison for three months during the summer of 1967 for nothing, other than the fact that the judge said that I had—I was a risk. And that they were going to deny me bail until Justice Black at the Supreme Court said, "You've got to give him bond." This is on my induction into the military and being

found guilty. Even though there was never a case and I have never been retried over that case, they held me in prison for three months that I don't get any credit for anywhere.

So, those things were real. And the disruption of families [1:40:00] and the credibility and the character assassination and all that was going on. So, these are the things that I think caused somewhat of the demise of the Movement. It was never Black Power. It was never a conflict between SNCC and Dr. King. And, you know, I was—and this is where I want to at least say this, and we're going to write it and we're going to document it and all. But when Garrow did his book back on King, he came and he interviewed me. And I said, "Garrow, I want to tell you something that happened."

Shortly after Cicero, Dr. King came back to Atlanta. I went back to Atlanta. Dr. King asked Stokely, Ricks, and myself to come by the house. He wanted to just have us over for dinner, and he had us down in the basement, and we stayed there for maybe four or five hours. And he said, "I want to understand Black Power. I want to understand what *you're* saying about Black Power." And we went through that and we went through the history. And he said, "But what about this? And what about that?" And he asked all the questions that he wanted to have answered. And he says that, "Okay, I am not going to be—as an organizational person, we are not going to be able to endorse and support Black Power. Okay? We just can't do that."

And we said, "Okay. But because you can't, then we have to agree that neither of us will find ourselves in a situation where we condemn one another. And we're going to all be able to go down the same street, and we'll all be very supportive." And we kind of shook hands on that. Because he said, "Now, explain to me where you're coming from and what you're saying. And is this just a hatred of whites and all that kind of stuff?" We explained that we're not even talking about that. We're talking about empowerment of black, tying our movement to movements

outside, and all that kind of stuff, and that's where we're coming from. You know our history and you know how we have gone through this experience.

And I think in the *From Chaos to Community* [*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*], Dr. King says that there were *some* people who articulated Black Power that were okay, but there were others who got it all screwed up. And I think that that is the time when he makes a reference to this meeting and our agreement, because there was never a moment in which there was an antagonism between Stokely and Dr. King. Matter of fact, when Dr. King came out in '67 with his position against the war in Vietnam, he *called* and asked Stokely and I to come to that Sunday morning meeting. And Stokely said something like, "But you know I'm a heathen." He said, "Bring your butt on anyhow, because I have something I want to say." And we got there. We were on the front seat.

JD: Oh, you were there for that historic—?

CS: Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah! So, I'm there and I'm listening. And he goes—you know. And I said, "And that's what we asked you to do all the time." You know, "We kept telling you that there was a *moral* basis. Ours is more political, and we understand you're not—but you have to deal with that on a moral basis."

So, that is missed sometimes, and, you know, and people keep the myth going about these other kinds of things. Now, Garrow said that he couldn't find, among other lieutenants of Dr. King, a confirmation of that meeting.

JD: So, he thought you made it up? [Laughs]

CS: I guess he thought I made it up. But I think that's pivotal.

JD: Oh, it's a *fascinating* piece of history.

CS: And, you know, I talked to Willie Ricks all the time. I talked to Kwame about that before he died, and I said, "You know, that's a part of the history we need to make sure is kept." But if you read Kwame's autobiography, you know, he actually talks about the friendship and the fondness.

JD: Yeah.

CS: When Dr. King goes to—what is it? Resurrection City?

JD: Um-hmm.

CS: Was it Resurrection City?

JD: No, Resurrection—that was after he—

CS: That was after. He was in Washington, I think, setting up—

JD: Um-hmm, yeah.

CS: For that kind of thing. And he was having problems with the black militants up there. And he said, "Stokely, I need some help with this." And he said, "What you need?" And he said, "I need for these people to back off for a few minutes, because what's happening is they're creating so much conflict that I can't get my message out about poverty." [1:45:00] And Stokely said, "Okay." And he went around and he talked to all those groups, called them all together, and said, "If you all don't want to be involved with this program with Dr. King, then don't go! But leave him alone!" And so, they still had that kind of working relationship, even as we were moving closer to Memphis and his assassination.

JD: Wow! This has all been fascinating stuff. I think we're going to have to come back, [laughs] if you are willing.

CS: Alright.

JD: What we have here is a period when you personally were undergoing much stress—

CS: Absolutely.

JD: With being jailed for refusing the draft, the organizing in Orangeburg and the Orangeburg Massacre—

CS: Right.

JD: When you were incarcerated there, you were broke—

CS: Yeah.

JD: You had limited resources, and yet you came back and you devoted yourself to a career in education.

CS: Right.

JD: You got your masters at Harvard, your doctorate at UNC. Tell us briefly what you've been doing these last 40 years.

CS: Well, what I've been doing these last 40 years is enjoying one of the most unique experiences that I've ever had, and that was being a member of a situation that was almost like a university setting, where I had contact with the Archibald Coxes of the world, and Dr. King, and Whitney Youngs, and Malcolm X, and Ella Baker, and Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ruby Doris Robinson, and a collective of individuals who made a difference in this world. And I got an education that I could have not gotten under any other circumstance.

And so, I am trying to share that with the community from which I have come and share that with the community that's still interested in knowing about the courage and determination of these legends. I stand on the shoulders of them. I very proudly stand on the shoulders of them. I want to represent that. I want to be able to tell my story and tell their story, too, because in telling mine, I always include them in that whole process.

JD: Part of your story is your autobiography. A copy is right there, if you'd hold that up.

CS: Yeah.

JD: *The River of No Return*. It is—was published 40 years ago, and I still think that it is, in terms of Movement autobiographies, this is the most insightful and honest I have read. So, people watching this or reading the transcript, pick up this book, and you will get even more of the story. Dr. Sellers, thank you very much. We are indebted to you for sharing your insights with us.

CS: Okay. Thank you very much, and I'm glad to be able to get the latter part into this film.

[Recording ends at 1:48:00]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council